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Dianne Turner

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## Exhibitions of Children's Art: History, Ideology, and Economics

### *Dianne Turner*

Exhibitions of art have existed for several hundred years. In 1760 the first fully organized public exhibition of art took place. The exhibition had a purpose for creating a need for exhibiting artists' work. The exhibition was developed after the public wanted to see annual prize competition's winners and work of artists from the Society of Arts. This exhibition made arrangements for selected works that were demonstrating skill in drawing. Selection for the content of the exhibit was based on those that were the best in specified achievements. This annual exhibit went far to establish the reputations of contributors, opened up their work for public appreciation and criticism of art, and left a balance of sales towards catalogs from exhibits. The funds from the catalogs were invested to apply towards the advancement of art. From this artists found in exhibitions a means of improving their financial position without dealing through personal patronage. Admission was free and the interest created was considerable. The exhibit led to more specifically organized exhibitions (Luckhurst, 1951).

About a century later another of artists' works was organized for a specific purpose. Unlike the Society of Arts exhibition in 1760, this exhibition was organized by the artists themselves and not by a group of outside patrons with an interest in viewing artists' work. In 1867 a group of young people organized exhibitions of their own work independent of the

officially authorized, juried exhibitions known as the salons. The group of artists later became known as the impressionists. The project collapsed shortly thereafter because of a lack of money. Two years later, one of the artists from the group announced that a dozen talented people had decided to rent a space in order to hold nonjuried exhibitions of their own work as well as that of others by invitation. These painters, most of whom had previously exhibited works belonged to that group of naturalists which had the ambition of painting nature and life in their large reality. Their association, however, was not just a small clique. They intended to represent the interests of the artists hoping for the adhesion of all seriously artists. From the beginning this group was broadly based and encompassed a wide range of interests. As a result, it eluded a simple definition and seemed to exist principally for the purpose of providing an alternative to official exhibitions. The impressionists' shows remained the principal means through which the public and critics experienced avant-garde art during the 1870's and 1880's. Despite ongoing organizational problems, internal rifts, disloyalty, hostile critics, and an uncertain membership of artists of widely varying ability and stylistic tendencies, the jointly organized exhibitions did in fact represent much of what was new in art. Moreover, they remind us that the actual evolution of art seldom describes the smooth trajectory that art historians, critics and the public often attempt to impose on modern art in the effort to understand it and predict its course (Moffet, 1986).

Exhibitions of artists work like the impressionists and the Society of Arts are exhibited for some type of idea that the artist or organizer of the exhibition wants to promote. This idea may be politically or financially motivated in nature. The work is made to not only sell the idea itself but the work of art as well. Artists can submit works of art to juried exhibitions or organize exhibitions on their own. The impressionist group organized independent exhibitions of their work outside of the salons to ensure their works were exhibited and that their ideas were represented. Exhibitions of artists' work need some type of idea, motivation, objective, sponsorship and location to be successful in obtaining a viewing audience. When artists' works were being exhibited for the merit in their drawing achievement at the Royal Society of Art, there was an idea to show the child as artist in an exhibition of children's drawings sponsored by the Society for Art (Luckhurst, 1951). That was a beginning of having exhibitions of children's art represent children's works as works of art. It can be assumed that exhibitions of children's art were modeled after exhibitions of artists' works utilizing the same format for exhibiting works. The format for adult exhibitions included idea, motive, objective, sponsorship and location. This format continued onto children's exhibitions of art.

Organized exhibitions of children's art have been in existence for much of this century. Past exhibitions of children's art have been held for some type of adult purpose and motive. The ideas behind past exhibitions of children's art were developed by some kind of adult motive to make an

impact on the public viewing them. These ideas included exhibitions that represented teachers showing a type of children's art, commercial art supply companies sponsoring exhibits for increase in sales, current trends in the world, promotion of political causes and philosophies of an art educator. In today's elementary school art program exhibitions of children's art are typically held for either decorative or promotional purposes of the school.

Exhibitions of children's art can succeed in influencing the public's understanding of works of art by children. Typically, exhibitions of children's art are exhibited for some type of adult motive--not the child's. Today, the typical elementary school art exhibit exemplifies children's works chosen by adults to promote either the school art program or the school itself. The role of the exhibition can be one where children learn about the artist's role in exhibiting their own works of art. What role then does the art exhibit take on for the child? Is it one of recognition, or one which represents their work as works of art? Do adults exhibit children's works as products of works of art or for the aesthetic or ideational merit?

Educating the public to understand child art as works of art was the main objective for the Omega Workshops' exhibits of student works (students of art critic Roger Fry) in 1917. The exhibit promoted the relationship of child art to the works of adult artists, thus making the experience important for the children and educating the viewers about the children's work (Carline, 1968). This exhibition was said to have acquired a

wider interest in child art. A preface to the exhibition of the works of art by children at the Omega Workshop in 1919 stated:

It is evident that the ordinary method of teaching art does two things: first it prevents the children from producing anything of the slightest value while they are young, and secondly, it does nothing to enable them to express themselves when they are grown up (Carline, 1968, p. 170).

The 1930's saw sympathetic understanding of the problems involved in the artistic education of the child (Carline, p. 172). Using exhibitions of children's art, Fry kept alive arguments against "the teaching of art" through frequent discussion in columns (Carline, p. 170). Fry's decision to represent children's art as works of art was promoting his idea of the child as artist.

Early in the history of child art exhibitions, Franz Cizek exhibited works of art by children in his classes based on the premise that child art was an art form that only the child would produce. The child as artist notion was also expressed in the teaching of Marion Richardson. An art teacher at Dudley Girls' High School, Marion Richardson first exhibited her girls' work at the Omega Workshops. Carrying her students' work with her, Marion Richardson took advantage of the opportunity to show her students' drawings to Roger Fry. Fry saw the "same forthright and simplicity and freshness of vision that was characteristic of younger children's art" in Marion Richardson's examples (Richardson, 1946).

Although the idea of the child as artist seemed successful in some exhibitions the fact remains that the organization of the children's work was motivated by some type of idea the adults attempted to achieve. Cizek, Fry and Richardson each attempted in their own way to promote a natural type of art by children rather than the typical school art influence style of work.

The adult motive for children's art exhibitions has not always been one of representing the child as artist. Children's art in the form of an exhibit proved to be a successful motivator for Binney and Smith (the Crayola Crayon Company) in 1936. A national exhibition of child art, entitled "Young America Paints," encouraged teachers and children to submit child art. The purpose, according to the supply company, was to acquaint the general public with what was being achieved in the field of art education. What may be the other motive behind this exhibition was the company's intent to sell their products to a "school audience" by encouraging participation in a national exhibition. Marie Falco, art director of "Young America Paints," maintained that "the visitors for the most part take the show serious and realize that the work must not be judged by adult standards, but as "spontaneous creative expression of childhood and youth." The commercial art supply company's intent was to represent the notion that art education is for every boy and girl and "not merely a talented few" (Falco, 1941). This exhibition demonstrates how a commercial art supply company pursued exhibitions of children's art for economic reasons.

More recently Binney and Smith developed an exhibition for elementary children's art in an attempt perhaps to maintain a contemporary interest through a large publicity campaign. The exhibition, entitled "Dream Makers," was introduced in the United States in 1984. The exhibition was carefully planned to appeal to the integration of art in the classroom (Dream Makers, p. 20). This exhibition sought entries by mailing out elaborate packages about Dream Makers. The Dream Makers are famous figures in history who are illustrated on cards. The package included cards that gave brief scenarios about the lives of the famous figures, certificates for all participating children and a catalog of art materials from the Binney and Smith Company. The children were asked to do an art project based on one of their dreams. The company appointed judges to judge the children's art work submitted for the national art exhibition. The exhibition traveled through various locations since it first began. The exhibition still takes place today with different Dream Makers packages being sent out to elementary art teachers and elementary classroom teachers. The first year, the exhibition traveled from several museums throughout the United States. Today, the exhibition is exhibited at different universities in four regions (north, south, east and west) across the country. The company issued a statement about the exhibition in the schools after the exhibition had taken place for one year. The following statement was issued by the Binney and Smith Company as an overview for the large scale children's art exhibition:

Federal budget cuts have diminished the role of art education and



art educators in schools across America.

Through the implementation of the Dream Makers program Binney and Smith saw the opportunity not only to call to the general public's attention the importance of art education and art educators but to expand art's role in America's children (Dream Makers, 1985, p. 1).

The company promoted the exhibition, explaining that their commitment to children's art education sought support of key figures in each state (Chief state school officer). This exhibition sought an appeal for all participants involved. For the teachers, the exhibition provides recognition and money if a student's work is selected. For children, the appeal was in having art work selected and recognized for being in a national exhibition. The appeal for the school administrators was to have the subject matter of the exhibition as an integral part of the curriculum. Binney and Smith's initial proposal for the Dream Maker's exhibit disclosed the intended motives for the exhibition which were not publicized as part of the exhibition package to teachers. The primary objectives in the proposal were:

1. To promote awareness and use of CRAYOLA brand products,
2. To position Binney and Smith as the champion of children's art,
3. To focus national attention on the need for and value of art education (Dream Makers, 1983, p. 3).

A secondary objective for the exhibition, according to the company, was that the exhibit would "enhance self-esteem among children by challenging their creative thinking and expression" (Dream Makers, 1983). The Dream

Makers exhibitions continue today as an annual exhibition of elementary children's art work based on the Dream Makers packages the company sends out to schools.

The economic motive takes a political turn in an exhibition entitled "Children's Drawings of the Spanish Civil War." The exhibit initially took place in 1938 in New York City at Lord and Taylor's Department Store. The exhibit was shown twice after the original in 1939 at the Institute of Modern Art in Boston and again in 1939 at the Worcester Museum. The exhibition was recently reorganized and exhibited in New York in 1986.

Accompanying the exhibit was a small catalog, entitled **They Still Draw Pictures**, which was sold in conjunction with the exhibition. In an introduction to the exhibit written by Aldous Huxley he makes a plea for an end to violent war. The catalog produced for this exhibit was carefully planned to ensure that support and sympathy be given to the cause due to the way in which the children depicted war scenes in their drawings. According to Aldous Huxley, the quality of the drawings was not what was important to those holding the exhibition. "In scenes of war, the implements of modern warfare are pictures with an accuracy that permits identification of airplanes and tanks by type" (Spanish Institute, p. 113). The response to the catalog and exhibition was warm and supportive (p. 11). Organizers of the exhibition had brought over works based on different categories in response to the war. The categories were: life before the war, life in the colony, war scenes and bombardments, scenes of evacuation and life in the countryside. The intent of the original exhibit was

to promote the idea of the children suffering from the war. The more recent showing of the exhibit was held not so much for political reasons, as a commemoration of the first exhibition. The original exhibit was held to raise American awareness of the effect of the Civil War on the Spanish people.

A more recent exhibition of children's art work, entitled "Pictures from a Small Planet" (1979), was held to illustrate children's views of their countries' contemporary state, not in times of war as the Spanish Civil War drawings did, but in a time of peace. Children were asked, through the work of UNICEF, to give their art as their contribution toward informing the world about the status, needs and points of view of children. Those who submitted work were asked to show in some way the cultural, environmental or social aspects of the lives of people in their country (UNICEF, p. 4). The exhibition showed the universal dimension of the human experience, and issues of the time. The exhibition was arranged by themes to show the common interests and experiences among the world's peoples. Common themes categorized by organizers included: travel and transport, making music, celebrations, masks and masked figures, sports, fun and play, work, religion, nature, animal scenes from stories at school, at home, farm life, village or town life, city scenes and family portraits. The exhibitions traveled for a year as "An Exhibition on the Occasion of the International Year of the Child." The locations varied from institutions to museums in the U.S. This exhibition showed how adults can organize children's work to promote a current issue among the world.

Exhibitions of children's art have also been organized to commemorate the work of an outstanding art teacher as well as promoting political goals. Barclay-Russell was an art educator who believed in various aspects about children's art which could be categorized by content in the work. Reorganization of children's art work from Barclay-Russell's child art collection was put together by an associate and the Society for Education through Art, the National Society for Art Education, The Institutes of Education, Wiltshire Library and Museum Service. The intent of the organizers was to present the life work or philosophy of an art educator through a collection of children's art works.

There can be many objectives or purposes for children's school art exhibitions just as there are for many commercial and commemorative children's art exhibitions. Purposes of past school exhibitions of children's art include: exhibiting work to promote the school art program; exhibiting children's art work to promote a community art gallery; and exhibiting work to promote an art program as well as an individual student.

A student art exhibition which was annually organized to promote the school art program and the school was held for several years throughout the school building. Joseph V. Kotzin, art teacher from Wilson Junior High School in Philadelphia (grades 1 through 9) wrote about his school's annual exhibition (started in 1928) of all subjects, including art, in a 1941 issue of **School Arts** magazine. Kotzin wrote that "students work was exhibited in all subjects in the classrooms and corridors of the school. The best work of all the students was displayed in the halls and the art

rooms." He pointed out that there was usually not enough space to receive all the work selected. There was, however, an attempt to make the display representative of the student body. The work was kept on display for several weeks after the night of the show in order that the pupils themselves might have more time to judge, evaluate, and assimilate the results of the school activities. The purpose of the exhibition was to give an indication of what pupils should expect to do in courses. This annual school exhibition had about 500 different art pieces exhibited from about 300 different individuals represented in the exhibition (Kotzin, 1941).

Art teachers may choose to exhibit children's work outside of the school to bring attention not only to the school art program but a particular place of business as well. This was the case of the "Children's Gallery" in the Grand Rapids Art Gallery, in the 1930's and 1940's. The Children's Gallery had a new exhibit of painting, sculpture, crafts or all three together chosen from the work of children done in the public school system. According to Otto Karl Bach, Director of the Grand Rapids Art Gallery, the art department of the Grand Rapids, Michigan public schools visualized art as an instrument of social adjustment, a means of integration whereby the child may feel an intelligent correlation between her or his personal experiences and the community at large, and the world beyond the community. The Grand Rapids Art Gallery, a private association without public funds, functioned as a "public institution in an effort to demonstrate the value of art to the layman at large, to correlate the artistic and the practical. The two see in the child, with his comparatively uninhibited

modes of expression, a leader into the future of art" (Bach, 1941). The exhibitions of children's art resulted in having children frequently visit the gallery generated by their own interest. Child attendance to the gallery made up 50 percent of the yearly total. The children pointed the way to many parents. The fact that a parent's child's work was hung at a public gallery often brought a parent to the gallery for the first time, which quite frequently lead to other visits to the gallery. The organizers of the exhibitions had succeeded in attracting the community to the local art gallery through the association of the public schools with children's art work.

Exhibitions of children's art can feature a child artist who succeeds in an art program, thus promoting the art program, art teacher, and child as well. During the month of April, 1940 an exhibition of children's work was shown at the Illinois Art Gallery in Chicago. The work was done in the Settlement Houses, Y.M.C.A.s and boy's clubs throughout the city, and classes were taught by artists-teachers employed on the Illinois Project, Works Projects Administration. One of the features of the exhibition was a group of twenty paintings by a fourteen-year-old student who attended classes at the Chicago Commons. The student, Joe Ligammeri, had never taken any interest in art until about a year and a half before the exhibition when he first entered the art class. His art teacher, Betty Howard, a Chicago artist, recognized the talent of the student and gave him much of her time and attention. She had been an inspiration to his work and study in art. Joe's paintings in this exhibition were the center of interest of all who

attended and requests were made to purchase his paintings. The money received from the sale of his paintings enabled Joe to buy materials to produce other works and according to his teacher, "gave him a feeling of confidence in himself and the things he did so well" (Howard, 1941). The feature exhibition resulted in making the student more interested in pursuing art as a career as well as in promoting the artists-teachers classes held throughout the city at the time.

Just as past exhibitions of children's art in the schools were political (Wilson Junior High School's annual exhibitions and the exhibitions of the Grand Rapids Art Gallery), showed current trends in educational philosophies (the Barclay-Russell exhibition), and promoted certain causes (exhibition of Joe Ligammeri's work at the Y.M.C.A.), exhibitions in today's elementary schools serve these purposes as well. School exhibitions may not be as obvious in purpose as other exhibitions organized by businesses and organizations. Ideas are usually represented by the art teacher choosing the works of art by children and exhibiting them in the school to represent the school art program. Exhibitions of children's art in the school may be exhibited in the school's hallways, cafeteria, office or anywhere which may attract viewing attention. Additionally, teachers may exhibit children's art work at school administrative offices, stores, or other community sites outside of the actual school. Who is the work exhibited for? Are the children whose works are chosen aware of the purposes of the work being exhibited? Usually, school administrators and art teachers chose work that

represented the district or school art program's best art work with which the public can easily identify.

The exhibitions of children's art we have briefly examined here (Binney and Smith's "Young America Paints," "Dream Makers," "Children's Drawings of the Spanish Civil War," "Pictures from a Small Planet," and "Children's Drawings from the Barclay-Russell Collection," "Children's Gallery" in Grand Rapids, Wilson Junior High School's annual exhibition, and the feature exhibition of Joe Ligamneri) demonstrate adult ideas associated with some type of political, educational or financial motive. Exhibitions of children's art can take on a different meaning from the viewpoint of the child if the work is treated as a work of art and not as a token of political or financial motivation. What do these works mean to the children? Is it important that the exhibition have some meaning to the child? Is it possible for school art exhibitions as we know them to take on a more personal meaning to the child and his or her art as opposed to the art teacher or adult selecting works for decorative or promotional purposes in the art program? It is not necessarily bad that exhibitions of children's art are exhibited by adults for adults, however, how might the meaning of the exhibit be changed if exhibitions were organized by adults for children?

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